

Lessons from Stockbridge: Jonathan Edwards and the Stockbridge Indians

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Almost ten years ago, when I was in search of a dissertation topic, Harry Stout remarked to me, almost casually, “Well, no one’s really looked at Edwards and the Stockbridge Indians.” It seemed perfect—a way to combine my interest in cultural encounter and American intellectual/religious history. Frustrated by Edwards scholarship that gave short shrift to the mission and by ethnohistorical scholarship that had a largely mercenary interest in missionaries as sources for information on Indians, I hoped to write a history of religious encounter at a mission site. Of course, I have since discovered why there has been so little crossover interest in the Stockbridge mission: there is seemingly little in the Stockbridge sources that promises to shed light either on Edwards’s theological projects or on the Stockbridge Indians’ experiences as members of Edwards’s congregation. In this respect, the Stockbridge mission is a microcosm of larger issues in the study of early American history. Despite longstanding calls for an integrated narrative of Indian and white history, one that delineates the influence of cultural encounter on whites as well as Indians, such a project has been slow to materialize.¹ A close look at the Stockbridge sources and what they can and cannot tell us about the mutual influences of Edwards and the Stockbridge Indians is thus suggestive of the prospects for the larger project of creating a new narrative able to hold together white and Indian, social and intellectual history. Here then, I survey the Stockbridge sources, exploring possible vectors of influence between Edwards’s mission experience and his theological reflections. Then, I turn to the even sparser evidence of Edwards’s influence on the formation of Mahican Christianity.²

THE STOCKBRIDGE INFLUENCE ON EDWARDS

The largest category of sources from Edwards's Stockbridge years is also the best known: the theological and philosophical treatises, including, most famously, *Freedom of the Will*, *The Nature of True Virtue*, and *Original Sin*. Of these three, *Original Sin* contains the most explicit references to American Indians, although these are few and far between. And on the surface, these references appear to be little more than restatements of general English assumptions about the inferiority of native culture. Pointing to the "multitudes of nations" of North and South America, Edwards asked, "What appearance was there when the Europeans first came hither, of their being recovered, or recovering, in any degree from the grossest ignorance, delusions, and most stupid paganism?" On the other hand, Edwards found Indians to be "mere babes as to proficiency in wickedness, in comparison of multitudes that the Christian world throngs with."³ Yet even such seemingly positive mentions are intended less to laud native peoples than to shame Europeans for their state of irreligion despite prolonged access to gospel revelation. The two other major Stockbridge treatises, *Freedom of the Will* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, contain scarcely any mention at all of Indians.

One obvious explanation for the absence is that Edwards's mission experience left no discernable trace on his theological endeavors. We can at least safely conclude there was no *conscious* influence. In part, this absence reflects the realities of colonial power—Edwards could hold to his Christianity without any conscious challenge from his mission experience, while Mahicans could not pretend to be unaffected by European presence. Viewed this way, a different set of questions emerges: what were the structures that rendered English culture so seemingly immune to encroachment? Are those structures at work in Edwards's texts? And do these texts work in any way to shore up the cultural power that they reflect or do they challenge that power?

I have argued elsewhere that *Original Sin* both reflects and challenges the colonial setting in which it was written.⁴ This reading surfaces when *Original Sin* is considered in light of Edwards's sermons to the Stockbridge Indians. Edwards preached over two hundred original sermons to his Stockbridge audience. Despite their number, these sermons seem to promise few rewards. They are mostly in outline form, thus making them considerably shorter than the manuscripts of sermons to his Northampton congregation, and they seem to be theologically rudimentary. They are indeed simpler than his sermons to the English, as Stockbridge schoolmaster, Gideon Hawley, observed when he remarked that Edwards was a "plain and practical preacher" who refrained from displaying "any metaphysical knowledge in the pulpit."⁵ In aggregate, these sermons yield evidence of Edwards's efforts to tailor their form and

content to suit what he perceived to be the needs of his audience. Thus, Edwards relied heavily on images and parables, believing these had the power to reach straight to the heart of the listener.

While the form of Edwards's Stockbridge sermons was noticeably different from his sermons to his English congregations, the Calvinist doctrine was essentially unchanged; Edwards elaborated the sinfulness of human nature, God's justice in punishing sinners, and the absolute necessity of divine grace for salvation. Only when we compare the Indian sermons with his sermons to his English congregation at Stockbridge does the distinctiveness of the Indian sermons emerge more clearly. The doctrine preached for English and Indian was identical, but Edwards often provided encouragement to his Indian audience where he chided the English.

For example, in one sermon, Edwards encouraged his Indian congregants to take tender care of their souls, to "forsake wickedness and seek after Holiness" and not to "act the part of Enemies of Enemies [sic] to your soul," but rather to "be friends to our own souls."⁶ In another sermon, Edwards consoled his audience that although in this world "good men have Enemies" who "hurt 'em and afflict 'em," in heaven they "shall be set on high out of the reach of all their Enemies" where nothing can hurt them and "all Tears shall be wiped away from their Eyes."⁷ "God is willing," promised Edwards, that all "whose hearts are joined to Christ should have Christ and his blood to wash 'em from sin." If repentance is earnest, Edwards preached, "there is forgiveness offered to all nations," for Christ "did not die only for one nation" but made clear "his design of making other nations his People," even those that "had been Heathens."⁸ Christ offers himself "readily and freely" to suffer for sinners, "let 'em be who they will of what nation soever they are."⁹ In a baptismal sermon Edwards preached, "'tis the will of Christ that all nations shall be taught." Christ recognized "no difference" among the nations; Christ had "died for some of all /all need / all alike."¹⁰

By contrast, in his sermons to the English at Stockbridge Edwards often strove to shame and frighten his listeners into leading a godly life. Interestingly, Edwards composed very few original sermons for the English in Stockbridge—only about twenty.¹¹ The rest were repitched from old Northampton sermons. The tone of the new sermons is generally cautionary, as a few examples will suggest. In a sermon preached in October 1751, Edwards cautioned his English audience to "be sensible of your own Blindness" and not think "you can open your own eyes."¹² Sometime that same year, Edwards sought to humble the wealthy and the proud, reminding them "Those that obtain the [highest] degree of worldly wealth and honour and enjoy the most pleasure in their carnal enjoyments can retain them but for a moment all suddenly vanishes away like a vapor that is dissipated by the winds."¹³ On

another occasion, Edwards chastised those who remained indifferent to gospel preaching: “how selfish are they who have not so much as any reliable signs of their being at good terms with God and yet take no thorough care to get any.”¹⁴ And when Edwards turned to his sermons previously preached for his Northampton congregation, he seems to have chosen those which chided rather than those that comforted. In one lecture to the English children at Stockbridge, originally preached at Northampton in 1740, Edwards railed, “I had rather go into Sodom and preach to the men of Sodom than preach to you and should have a great deal more hopes of success.”¹⁵

So what does this difference in tone mean? To be fair, Edwards did indeed deploy warnings of the terrors of hell to his Indian congregation, yet the tone of the sermons suggests that Edwards did not find Indian sins to be a personal affront or representative of a willful disregard of his gospel preaching in the same way he responded to English recalcitrance.¹⁶ But still, without some evidence that this distinctive preaching crept into his theological treatises, we cannot conclude that Edwards was markedly shaped by his mission work, but only that he did what all New England ministers were taught to do—tailor his message to his audience.¹⁷

Had it not been for his mission experience, I believe Edwards might not have emphasized in *Original Sin* the equality in human depravity to the extent that he did. In this treatise, while the American Indians, together with other examples of “pagan” peoples, serve as examples of the absolute necessity of divine revelation in acquiring knowledge of “true religion,” the conclusion Edwards wanted his readers to absorb was that all of humanity would be in a similar state were it not for the grace of God. Europeans were not inherently more virtuous than Indians. Any superiority evident in European society could be explained by the advantages of having long had access to true religion through the written revelation of the gospel. At the end of the treatise, Edwards underscored the ethical implications of the doctrine of original sin. Far from resulting in “an ill opinion of our fellow-creatures” thereby promoting “ill-nature and mutual hatred,” as his opponents argued, the affirmation of the doctrine of original sin should induce humility. By contrast, to disown “that sin and guilt, which truly belongs to us,” in Edwards’s view, leads only to a “foolish *self-exaltation* and *pride*.” Acceptance of the doctrine would have the salutary effect of teaching “us to think no worse of others, than of ourselves,” and convincing people that “we are *all*, as we are by nature, *companions* in a miserable helpless condition.” This, in turn, “tends to promote a mutual *compassion*.” If the doctrine of original sin is abandoned in favor of faith in human reason then sin is simply a matter of choice. This in turn leads to the belief that “the generality of mankind are very wicked, having made themselves so by their own free choice, without any necessity:

which is a way of becoming wicked, that renders men truly *worthy of resentment*.”¹⁸ In a strange way then, *Original Sin* emerges as a call to human fellowship rooted in a conviction of equality.

But before we (or at least I) get too carried away thinking Edwards was the champion of the downtrodden, it is important to remember that it was a related doctrine of universal applicability that underwrote New World colonization and mission efforts. If humans are naturally sinful, then all need Christ as savior, and it is therefore incumbent upon those in possession of the written revelation to bring it to those without. It was the universalism (not in the theological sense) of Christianity that both sponsored colonialism and promised equality. If this analysis of the relationship between Edwards’s treatise on Original Sin and his pastoral work with the Stockbridge Indians is correct, then it suggests that the dual themes of American egalitarianism and exceptionalism are not easily dismissed as simply paradoxical, but are in fact symbiotic, in much the same way that Edmund Morgan has argued that slavery and freedom were mutually implicated.¹⁹

EDWARDS’S INFLUENCE ON THE STOCKBRIDGE INDIANS

Edwards’s influence on his Stockbridge Indian congregants is even harder to trace than the influence of his mission experience on his theology. There are few sources in the mission records that shed even the most diffuse light on Indian experiences. Edwards wrote much of the political infighting among the overseers of the mission, but absolutely nothing about his perceptions of the Indians’ encounter with Christianity. The difficulty of accessing native perceptions of colonial encounters would seem to be a universal feature of colonial manuscripts. But when the Stockbridge records are compared with the Moravian records from their mission to the Mahicans just forty miles from Stockbridge, it becomes apparent that there was something quite unique about English mission sources. All sources left by missionaries are problematic as sources for native experiences, but they are problematic in different ways. The Moravians recorded extensive details about the lives of mission residents—making it possible to reconstruct detailed family trees and gain some understanding of the meaning of communion to native communicants, for example—while the English missionaries, Edwards included, scarcely ever mention a name at all. I am not entirely sure what to make of this, but I suspect that the answer lies where culture, power, and perceptions of the self intersect. In Edwards’s New England, “Christ” and “Culture” (to use Niebuhr’s terms²⁰) were so closely linked that entrance into the corporate body was of primary significance, not the distinctiveness of individual

experience. Thus, English missionaries tended to measure success by the numbers of individuals who entered the corporate identity through a profession of belief. By contrast, the Moravians, as outsiders in colonial society, dreamed less of creating Christian nations than of transforming individuals through participation in ritual, and so Moravian sources provide vastly richer sources on Indian individuals' experiences of Christian ritual.²¹

So what hope is there of gaining insight into the Indian encounter with Christianity under Edwards's ministry? Unfortunately very little, at least not in any direct way. But like the treatises and sermons, with some massaging, the Edwards sources do, I think, yield up some clues. By my count, individual Stockbridge Indian names appear in Edwards's vast writings exactly thirteen times.²² Eight of these appear in Edwards's "diary and memorandum book," where he recorded marrying four Indian couples.²³ Two letters contain reference to Edwards's interpreter, John Wauwampequunnaunt. And another is not actually by Edwards—it is a piece of handwriting practiced by Ebenezer Maunnauseet (eleven times over he penned: "he who lives upon hope may dy of Disappointment"), later drafted into service by Edwards for his sermon notes.²⁴

The two remaining names, Cornelius and Mary Munneweaunummuck, appear in Edwards's hand at the bottom of a long profession of faith. In almost all respects, this profession of faith (along with several other similar professions, all unsigned) is entirely unexceptional. It begins, "And I do now appear before God and his People solemnly to give up my self to God to whom my Parents gave me upon my Baptism having so far as I know my own Heart chosen Him for my Portion and set my Heart on Him as my greatest and sweetest Good," and ends, "I profess universal forgiveness and good will to mankind and promise to be subject to the Government of this Church during my abode here."²⁵ Because it is so formulaic and written in Edwards's hand besides, we would perhaps be justified in dismissing the profession as having little to tell us. But, given that Edwards was willing to lose his job for his insistence on a profession of faith, we can safely assume Edwards did not treat these professions as merely *pro forma* recitations. He must have been persuaded that Cornelius and Mary's testimony, though scripted, was an apt representation of their inner lives. While this does not tell us anything at all about what it meant to Cornelius and Mary, it does suggest that there had been significant exchange between the candidates and Edwards on the subject of Christian belief and practice.

Other Stockbridge sources—letters, petitions, deeds—allow for a fairly thorough depiction of the secular affairs of the mission, but those two professions of faith are the sum total of information regarding Indian religious experiences at Stockbridge under Edwards's tenure.²⁶ We can get a bit closer

however, by employing the “upstreaming” strategy long used by ethnohistorians.²⁷ Commonly, upstreaming is used in the attempt to recover traditional or pre-contact cultural practices, not to speculate about Christian practice among the first generation of self-identified Christian Indians. The life and writings of Hendrick Aupaumut, chief of the Stockbridge Indians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, allow for a glimpse into native Christianity at Stockbridge. Aupaumut was born in Stockbridge in 1757, and, presumably, baptized by Edwards. Throughout his life, Aupaumut was identified as Christian and Mahican, yet he has received scholarly attention primarily for his role as “cultural broker,” having served as intermediary between the newly formed United States and the hostile Ohio and Great Lakes Indians.²⁸

Two obscure letters provide tantalizing evidence of Edwards’s influence on the Mahican engagement with Christianity. The first is a letter sent by Aupaumut to Edwards’s son Timothy, in which he requested, “I should be thankful if you would lend me a Book. The Author is your Father—Concerning Affections or if you han’t such—wish to have the other mention[ed]—the Will.”²⁹ We have no way of knowing whether Aupaumut read Edwards’s treatises or what he made of them at the time, but the letter does suggest genuine engagement with Christianity—not the superficial and/or subversive practice sometimes attributed to Christian Indians.

A 1795 speech delivered by an unidentified tribal speaker, most likely Aupaumut, suggests that the theology of Edwards and the New Divinity movement had had some influence. The Stockbridges thanked the Quaker missionaries who had recently arrived to undertake work among the neighboring Brotherton Indians: “Brothers we thank the great spirit above that he has put it into your hearts to come this long journey to make us this friendly visit. We have swallowed all your words and good council with pleasure and delight, we are convinced they are the sentiments of your hearts. Brothers, we heartily thank you for the many tokens of your disinterested love and friendship towards us poor Indians.”³⁰

One further clue, from near the end of Aupaumut’s long life, suggests that he found in Christianity support for a vision of a common humanity, although it was one he had come to believe would only be realized in another world. In 1818, a missionary arrived in New Stockbridge, New York, on a fundraising tour to raise money for the conversion of the Jews in the holy land. After taking up a collection (of \$5.87) Aupaumut wrote a letter to be delivered by the missionary, addressed to “the head men of the remnant of the Children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Aupaumut first established a common humanity with the Jews by citing the Bible’s teaching that “all nations in the world descend from one man and woman, and that Jesus came to die for all, so we can call you brothers and address you as such.” In concluding his letter, Aupaumut imagined a time when the

Jews and “all the faithfull Gentiles will be received into heaven,” where there would be “no distinction between the different Tribes, wheather white, red or black.”³¹ Edwards’s audience for *Original Sin* may have disregarded its message of equality in depravity, but it appears that the Stockbridge Indians kept alive an egalitarian Christian tradition.

In closing, at the risk of claiming too much from an admittedly thin evidentiary base, I would suggest three possible lessons from Stockbridge. First, colonial texts, even those seemingly unrelated to the colonial project, should be interrogated for how they interact with colonial structures of power. In other words, does *Original Sin* or *Freedom of the Will* look any different when we remember that it was written in Stockbridge? Second, a commitment to human equality is often inextricably linked to forces of colonialism. And third, scholars of native Christianity have often asked the wrong question. We should ask not whether Indians understood Christian theology, but rather we should ask *how* did they understand Christian theology, and thus how did they indigenize Christianity?

NOTES

1. See James Axtell, “The Indian Impact on English Colonial Culture,” in Axtell, *The European and The Indians: Essays in Ethnohistory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 272–316. Nancy Shoemaker’s recent book is an excellent contribution to this project. Her decision to organize her book topically rather than chronologically allows her to demonstrate how various concepts (land, race, gender, etc.) evolved in white and Indian communities out of their interactions with each other. Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth Century North America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

2. For the most part, I will not here be explicitly considering the substantial body of JE’s Stockbridge letters, which have recently been made readily available in *WJE* 16. These letters are, however, invaluable in understanding the local politics of the mission.

3. *WJE* 3:124, 151, 160, 183.

4. The argument that follows is a shorter version of one I present in “‘Friends to Your Souls’: Jonathan Edwards’s Indian Pastorate and the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Church History* 72 (Dec. 2003): 736–65.

5. Gideon Hawley, “A Letter from Rev. Gideon Hawley of Marshpee, Containing an Account of His Services among the Indians of Massachusetts and New-York, and a Narrative of His Journey to Onohoghwage,” in Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections* ser. 1, vol. 4 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1794), 51. JE believed Indians were generally not capable of understanding metaphysical discourse, as he wrote in *Original Sin*: “from what I know and have heard of the American Indians . . . there are not many good philosophers among them.” *WJE* 3:160.

6. Punctuation added for clarity. JE, Sermon on Prov. 19:8, June 1756, box 13, f. 985.
7. JE, Sermon on Heb. 9:27, Jan. 1751, box 14, f. 1127.
8. JE, Sermon on Luke 24:47, Oct. 1751, box 14, f. 1078.
9. JE, Sermon on Rev. 3:20, Feb. 1751, box 14, f. 1141.
10. Undated ms. fragment from baptismal sermon, on back of letter from Gideon Hawley to JE, Dec. 28, 1756.
11. This number was reached using the Beinecke Library's guide and includes all sermons dated after August 1751 that are not marked with "St. Ind." This yields about 25 sermons, which is reduced even farther when the manuscripts are consulted. At least five of these are actually Indian sermons or are misdated and actually predate JE's tenure at Stockbridge.
12. JE, Sermon on Ps. 119:18, Oct. 1751, box 13, f. 972.
13. JE, Sermon on Prov. 3:16, 1751, box 3, f. 199 (previously preached in 1750 at Middletown, Windsor, and Salem Village).
14. JE, Sermon on II Kgs. 20:1–3, Aug. 1753, box 2, f. 286.
15. JE, Sermon on Matt. 13:3–4, 1740, repredicated May 1756, box 6, f. 463.
16. JE was certainly not soft on Indian sins, and warned his Stockbridge congregation: "if you go on in drunkenness and other wickedness, the gospel will be in vain. You will be the devil's people and will go to hell notwithstanding, and you will have a worse place in hell than those that never heard the gospel preached." JE, Sermon on Acts 16:9, Aug. 1751, box 14, f. 1093. On another occasion, Edwards counseled: "Take heed that you don't refuse to hearken to the gospel. You [who] have heard the gospel, it will be worse with you than other Indians." JE, Sermon on Matt. 10:14–15, Mar. 1755, box 13, f. 1027. See also JE, Sermon on Luke 13:7, June 1751, box 14, f. 1067.
17. See especially Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and J. William T. Youngs, *God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700–1750* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
18. Emphasis in the original. *WJE* 3:424.
19. Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).
20. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1956).
21. For a sample of the types of sources kept by the Moravians, see Rachel Wheeler, "Women and Christian Practice in a Mahican Village," *Religion and American Culture* 13 (Winter 2003):
22. I am not counting the various letters regarding the Mohawk presence at Stockbridge, which include mention of several Mohawk leaders.
23. JE, Diary and Memorandum Book, 1733–1757, box 21, f. 1267.
24. It is tempting to think the sermon JE outlined on that leaf of paper in some way responded to Ebenezer's abandonment of hope; Edwards counseled his listeners that Christ "Lights the way / of our salvation / food for our souls / means of the greatest / Comfort / God bestows his blessing." JE, Sermon on Ps. 27:4, Oct. 1756, box 13, f. 960.

25. Indian Professions of Faith, n.d., box 21, folder 1245.
26. Actually, a few additional details can be gleaned from the Moravian records, which include several accounts of Mahican-Moravian visitors to Stockbridge.
27. See, for example, Axtell, *The European and the Indian*.
28. Alan Taylor, "Captain Hendrick Aupaumut: The Dilemmas of an Intercultural Broker," *Ethnohistory* 43 (Summer 1996): 431–457.
29. Aupaumut was referring to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) and *Freedom of the Will* (1754). "Hendrick A." to "Hon'ble Timothy Edwards, Esq. Stockbridge or Wunnuqhqtoqhoke," 1775, Stockbridge Library, Stockbridge, Mass. The date on this letter was added later, and a more likely date is the early 1790s. I thank Lion Miles for pointing this out. Lion Miles, personal communication, Aug. 31, 2004.
30. Sergeant diary, entry dated May 18, 1795, Harvard Grants for Work among the Indians. Journals of John Sergeant, 1790–1909, Harvard University Archives.
31. This letter is signed by Aupaumut, listed as sachem, and five counselors. Aupaumut excerpt quoted in John Sergeant, diary entry dated April 8, 1819, Dartmouth College Archives. Aupaumut was among the tribal elite and we cannot infer from his experience that this was the shared experience of the tribe. On missions and tribal factionalism, see Daniel Richter, "Iroquois Versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642–86," *Ethnohistory*, 32 (1985): 1–16.